DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 512 SP 038 903

AUTHOR Bishop, Krystal
TITLE Tapestries: A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of Teaching in the Inclusive One-Teacher School.
PUB DATE 1999-11-17
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Point Clear, AL, November 17-19, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *One Teacher Schools; Private Schools; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Collaboration; Teacher Improvement; Teaching Experience
IDENTIFIERS Professional Identity; Seventh Day Adventist School System; Teacher Isolation; *Teacher Knowledge

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to better understand teachers as users of personal knowledge, examining teachers in inclusive one-teacher, Seventh Day Adventist schools. The study examined teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, teachers' personal practical knowledge, teachers' professional identity, contextual factors that enabled or constrained teachers' practice, consequences of isolation, and the role of professional development. Four teachers shared their thoughts regarding experiences they encountered on a regular basis. Data collection involved three phenomenological interviews, journal entries, and full-day classroom observations. Data analysis indicated that each teacher had a unique belief system, though there was some consistency among teachers, particularly related to their strong spiritual commitment. All teachers longed for more professional and personal interaction, though three expressed self-reliance and self-dependence. Teachers all supported one-teacher schools and believed they were equal to their peers in their teaching effectiveness. Factors enabling practice included teacher autonomy, multiple years to work with students, and heterogeneous groupings. Constraining factors included scheduling difficulties, time constraints, and supervision demands. Participants noted both positive and negative consequences when attempting to meet diverse needs within the one-teacher school. Teachers wanted to engage in professional development in order to effectively meet students' special needs. The paper presents 7 recommendations for further study. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 436 512

# TAPESTRIES:
# A PHENONMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING IN THE INCLUSIVE ONE-TEACHER SCHOOL

Presented at the
Mid-South Educational Research Association

Point Clear, Alabama
November 17, 1999

Krystal Bishop
Southern Adventist University

SP033903

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

K. Bishop

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

## Introduction

The multigrade classroom, including one-room schools, has long been an important organizational pattern of American education. Even today the one-teacher school has not been relegated to the archives of history. Rather, it is a powerful reality for those who teach and receive their education in such schools. Demographic statistics indicate that in 1990 there were 729 one-teacher public elementary schools continuing to operate in the United States (Guilford, 1991). Numerous one-teacher schools are also maintained by religious organizations such as the Lutheran Synod, Amish, Hutterites, and Seventh-day Adventists (DeWalt, 1989).

Current educational theory and practice herald collaboration, team teaching, and professional peer coaching as critical factors in nurturing a sense of professional identity & efficacy, promoting and maintaining professional development, and meeting the needs of special education students in an inclusive setting (Chase & Doan, 1994; Hargreaves, 1993). Furthermore, collaboration among regular and special educators is advocated as a precursor of effective inclusive classrooms ( Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; West & Idol, 1990). Yet in 1999 there is a small segment of educators who do, in fact, teach in the apparent isolation of a one-teacher multigrade classroom. The complexities of this organization are compounded by the fact that these schools frequently adhere to the philosophies of inclusion. Teachers in one-teacher schools are isolated and alone as they develop as professionals and seek to accommodate diversity within a multigrade school. Teachers in these schools must seek to accommodate diverse student needs without the manifest supports of collaboration, team teaching, peer coaching, or site-based consultation services.

## Problem

Within the American educational system, both public and private, there are numerous one-teacher multigrade schools. Frequently novice teachers are hired to begin their professional teaching career in such an environment. For various reasons experienced teachers may find themselves leaving more traditional classrooms to become a part of this one-teacher school configuration. Other teachers spend their entire professional career working within the apparently isolating confines of a one-teacher school. The diversity of the student population, including gifted and mildly handicapped learners, in these schools compounds the challenges these teachers face in creating an educational environment that is conducive to success for all students.

There is a scarcity of research that has been conducted on the experience of teaching in one-teacher schools. Furthermore, studies that have been conducted have typically employed data collection techniques that do not permit the actual voices of the teachers to be heard. According to Mehan (1979), researchers need to employ strategies that permit examination of the 'living processes' of education. With the reality of the continuing existence of one-teacher schools it would appear that research conducted in such settings would inform our understandings of the profession. It was felt by this researcher that a phenomenological research method would best enhance these understandings.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand teachers as users of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1983). It would seem that an understanding of teachers' personal practical knowledge, as used by teachers in inclusive one-teacher schools, is particularly significant due to the lack of opportunities to collaborate with peers, as well as the

absence of consultation services. The phenomenological methodology allowed teachers to share their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in an effort to learn how they view the experience of teaching within the context of the inclusive one-teacher school.

This phenomenological study was conducted within the setting of Seventh-day Adventist one-teacher inclusive schools. Such a setting mandates exceptional teaching and methods. This study explored the tapestry of experiences shared by teachers in this setting. Questions guiding the study were:

1. What beliefs about teaching and learning do these teachers hold?
2. What does teachers' personal practical knowledge look like on a day-to-day basis?
3. What type of professional identity do these teachers have and to what extent does teaching in this context matter for teacher professionalism?
4. Which contextual factors enable and/or constrain their practice as professionals?
5. What are the consequences of teacher isolation in this particular setting with respect to a teacher's ability to use personal practical knowledge in accommodating the diverse academic and behavioral needs of the inclusive classroom?
6. What is the role of professional development in helping teachers in one-teacher schools meet the diverse academic and behavioral needs found in inclusive classrooms?

## Findings

Four experienced teachers, currently teaching in one-teacher inclusive schools, were asked to share their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding the experiences they encounter on a regular basis. These experiences were shared through a series of three phenomenological interviews with each participant, participant journal entries kept throughout the study, and full-day observations conducted in the classrooms of the participants. This triangulation of data collection, as well as systematic data analysis, contributed to the internal validity of the study. In an effort to maintain trustworthiness and credibility, participant checks were incorporated into the study. The issues of representativeness and generalization were replaced by a compelling evocation of each participant's experience. The constructs relating to contemporary rural education, small schools' parochial education, and special education served as the framework for establishing themes and categories.

Rigorous data analysis enabled the researcher to weave a thick description of the realities of teaching in a contemporary one-teacher school. This descriptive account of the beliefs, perceptions, and realities provide an insightful panorama of the rich contextual tapestry of the one-room schoolteacher of the 1990s.

The data were reported as impressionistic sketches, narratives of individual participants, and conversations constructed from responses gathered during data collection. The tapestry analogy is used so that teachers might be understood more holistically. The choice was made to create impressionistic sketches and narratives so each participant might be understood as an individual. My impressions, along with the formative experiences and values related by the participants, are threads that are woven together to begin a framework for the tapestry of experiences lived and shared by the participants. There are threads of commitment, efficiency,

expressiveness, and reflective thinking.

While there is value in becoming familiar with each participant as an individual professional it is interesting to note the beliefs and perceptions that are consistent from teacher to teacher. Rather than merely providing my own interpretations of the more than 500 pages of transcribed text, I chose to use direct quotations from interviews and journals. Fragments from each participant's interviews and journals were pieced together to create contrived "conversations" among the participants. These 'conversations' formed the basis for reporting the data provided in response to the research questions.

Data were organized according to (a) beliefs about teaching and learning, (b) what teachers' personal practical knowledge looks like on a day-to-day basis, (c) professional identity & efficacy, (d) contextual factors enabling and/or constraining practice as professionals, (e) isolation and accommodating diversity, (f) the role of professional development, and (g) themes that emerged from the data.

*Themes Based on Beliefs*

Although the belief system of each teacher was uniquely personal, there was also some consistency from teacher to teacher. The most striking theme relating to the beliefs about teaching and learning expressed by the participants was their strong spiritual commitment. This commitment embraced every belief, every goal, every experience, and every perspective that was shared. Along with this commitment was the belief that God will, and does, help them in meeting the multiple demands placed upon them when teaching in the inclusive one-teacher school.

Other beliefs consistent among the participants were (a) the desire to meet individual needs, (b) maintaining high expectations for student achievement and conduct, (c) helping

students attain success in the learning experience, and (d) creating a teaching and learning environment that encourages experiential learning.

*Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge*

Due to the fact that they practice their profession in a one-teacher school the participants depended, to a great degree, on their personal practical knowledge. While all the participants did express a longing for more professional and personal interaction, three of them also expressed a sense of self-reliance and self-dependence. There was also a sense of appreciation for the autonomy enjoyed in the setting of the one-teacher school.

Like all teachers the participants were able to utilize their personal practical knowledge for creating routines, implementing inclusion, planning and instructing, individualizing, problem solving, disciplining, and organizing. The difference is that the participants must depend more on their personal practical knowledge than their peers who have access to other teachers, support personnel, and administrators. Another difference is the one-teacher inclusive school environment in which the participants must depend upon making use of their personal practical knowledge.

Routines seemed to be a critical element. In terms of inclusion practical knowledge looked like innovation, flexibility, problem solving, creativity, and occasionally requesting assistance from outside sources.

Although participants were generally unable to name a theory for a practice, I made notations of practices they were engaging in that made reference to theory. These included references to (a) student-centered learning, (b) the family-like environment of the classroom with student positive benefits of 'family' members working and learning together, (c) cross-age and

peer tutoring and groupings, (d) engaging students in conflict resolution techniques, (e) teachers viewing themselves as facilitators of learning, and (f) incorporating the principles of inclusion.

*Professional Identity*

The teachers seemed to be united in their support for one-teacher schools. With laughter one participant remarked, "I think you have to be half nuts to even think about doing this." But the intensity of her real responses to the realities of teaching in this setting reflected another participant's statement, spoken with emphasis, "We have nothing to be ashamed of in this kind of setting."

Although there are times they feel inadequate to meet the demands placed upon them the participants shared a sense that they are equal to their peers in their ability to be effective teachers. The perceptions, perhaps confused and negative, of the public were a concern expressed by participants. They acknowledged that it is difficult to explain the concept and inner workings of a one-teacher school to those unfamiliar with such educational settings.

The sense of efficacy experienced by the teachers allowed them to experience satisfaction despite the perceived negative factors associated with the one-teacher inclusive school. However, it must be noted that along with this general feeling of efficacy there was also some feeling that they might be missing out on professional opportunities that might allow them to be better teachers. These include (a) having occasion to share things they have learned, (b) receiving input from peers regarding the good work they are doing, (c) being able to teach a subject thoroughly to a specific grade level, (d) interacting professionally on a regular basis, and (e) working as a team to create and execute a dynamic vision for the school.

*Contextual Factors Enabling and/or Constraining Practice*

While teachers in one-teacher schools must function as individual artisans, this was not seen as an entirely negative experience. Numerous enabling factors were mentioned. While it was encouraging to listen to many examples of what they perceived to be positive benefits to themselves and to students it would seem odd if the participants had mentioned only those. Without creating a sense of complaining the participants were also able to share examples of those things that make if difficult to teach in the inclusive one-teacher school.

Enabling factors included, but were not limited to teacher autonomy; opportunities to meet individual needs through individualizing; significant amounts of time for one-on-one contact; close rapport with students; multiple years to work with students; heterogeneous groupings; student sense of ownership, responsibility, and accountability; and, increased opportunities for significant contact with parents of students.

Constraining factors defined by participants included, but were not limited to enormous expenditures of energy on the part of the teacher scheduling difficulties, need for significant resources for students in multigrades who will also be in attendance for multiple years; teaching for years in a subject not perceived to be a strength; amounts of information needed to be familiar with each subject for grades 1-8; fewer opportunities for direct group instruction; inability to cover subjects in-depth due to time constraints; never any time without the responsibility of having students present; extracurricular responsibilities; and, supervision demands.

*Isolation and Accommodating Diversity*

Participants expressed both positive and negative consequences when attempting to meet diverse needs within the setting of their one-teacher inclusive schools. Positive consequences

included being able to more easily change classroom dynamics to accommodate a student's unique needs. With such heterogeneity in the classroom, students with special needs do not seem to stand out when needing accommodations. There is also opportunity for older students to have remediation and reinforcement when being involved in cross-age tutoring. The participants also expressed satisfaction that comes from being a part of a continuous growth process that allows them to see students continuing to make progress over a number of years.

There was evidence of both academic and behavioral modifications being made for students with special needs. However, none of the participants felt completely satisfied with their professional knowledge of what accommodations and modifications would be best. With no one to provide feedback, or join in planning for meeting diverse needs, there tended to be a feeling of isolation and a sense of insecurity that students are receiving what is best.

*Professional Development*

The prevalent reason given by participants for engaging in professional development activities related to a desire to effectively meet the special needs of students in their schools. Participants engage in a variety of professional development activities including (a) professional reading, (b) choosing to attend break-out sessions relating to special needs when attending inservice meetings and conventions, (c) taking classes, (d) using personal days to observe in classrooms, (e) maintaining membership in study groups, (f) attendance at workshops conducted by professional organizations, (g) mentoring, and (h) assuming active roles on committees.

Participants felt that the professional development activities that would be most beneficial include (a) visitation to other schools, (b) classes and opportunities to actually simulate organizational skills, (c) opportunities to learn to interact more effectively with parents of

students, (d) classes in conflict resolution and behavior management, (e) information sessions on purchasing books and resources for classroom use, and (f) opportunities to present and share things they have learned with other teachers.

*Themes That Emerged From the Data*

Several observations were made about the participants and the tapestry of professional experiences and challenges they face. These were reported as the themes which follow:

1. Teachers in one-teacher inclusive schools must assume numerous academic and administrative responsibilities not usually assumed by teachers in more traditional settings.
2. The lack of opportunities in a one-teacher school to collaborate and socialize with peers creates a feeling of personal and professional isolation.
3. The need for support is critical in a one-teacher inclusive school.
4. Time is a critical factor when teaching in a one-teacher inclusive school.
5. Teachers have concerns that are specific to one-teacher inclusive schools.

## Grounded Theory

Based on the findings a grounded theory emerged that represented the researcher's thoughts regarding what is most needed for teachers in one-teacher inclusive schools to experience success and fulfillment in their teaching. This theory was developed so that these teachers might better translate their effectiveness into positive schooling experiences for their students, especially those with special needs. The grounded theory was reported as a set of assumptions, followed with recommendations related to each assumption. Recommendations were made to (a) teacher education institutions, (b) administrative bodies within the system, (c)

school boards, (d) pastors who are in churches operating one-teacher schools, (e) teachers, and (f) special education consultants. It is hoped that this grounded theory might prove beneficial in the development of a systems approach designed to more effectively meet the needs of all teachers who teach in one-teacher inclusive schools.

## Recommendations for Further Study

One-teacher schools are a reality in both the private and public sectors. Yet there is a paucity of research based on this phenomenon. More studies need to be conducted to come to a more informed understanding of teaching and learning in inclusive one-teacher schools. There is a need for both quantitative and qualitative studies, with much of this research structured as collaborative action research. This type of research would provide teachers in one-teacher schools with additional opportunities for collaboration.

Several areas of inquiry related to this study emerged throughout the research process. The following suggestions for further research regard teaching in one-teacher schools:

1. As I listened to the stories of these teachers, it seemed there might be many of the same issues present in one-teacher public schools. Replicate this study using participants from one-teacher public schools.
2. It was the perception of the participants that other teachers may think that teachers in one-teacher schools are less professional than those teaching in more traditional settings. Compare the perceptions of teachers in one-teacher schools with the attitudes of teachers in traditional classrooms toward those who teach in one-teacher schools.
3. Participants in this study had few opportunities to observe what other teachers are

doing. Because of this it would seem that the possibility exists that these teachers may be more pessimistic about what is happening in the teaching profession. Conduct a study to ascertain what positive aspects teachers in one-teacher schools see in the educational system.

4. Participants stated that it is becoming more difficult to convince parents that the one-teacher school can offer quality educational experiences. Survey parents' attitudes toward one-teacher schools and what suggestions they have for making one-teacher schools more able to deliver quality educational programs.

5. Students derive positive benefits from having teachers who are able to think aloud and model their own thinking and approaches to problem solving. Participants in this study felt they had little opportunity for modeling the learning process. Study ways this could be done more effectively in a multigrade school.

6. Certain attributes and beliefs seem critical to successful teaching in one-teacher schools. Study the attributes and beliefs of teachers considered to be successful in one-teacher schools.

7. There were times during my observations that students posed thought-provoking questions. When a teacher works with colleagues there is opportunity to share different perspectives on questions raised by students. Teachers in one-teacher schools do not have the privilege of these types of interactions. Study whether teachers in one-teacher schools expose their students to a variety of perspectives.

## Summary

As a professor of education I feel humble within the presence of those who practice the

profession of teaching on a day-to-day and year-by-year basis. I was an elementary teacher for 19 years. For the first three years of teaching I even taught in a one-teacher inclusive school. Yet I never had the opportunity to listen with undivided attention as others attempted to help in creating a more complete understanding of the world of the teacher. As a professor of education I feel humbled with the knowledge that teachers look up to professors as purveyors of knowledge many teachers do not have. I feel the need to honor my profession as a teacher of education.

In conclusion I would like to refer to words that I wrote as the study was being conceptualized. I ended the Background of the Study with the following words:

> The proposed study will attempt to explore and describe the tapestry of professional experiences lived on a daily basis by teachers in one-room inclusive schools. Yet a mere reconstruction of concrete happenings would be insufficient. A personal perspective is needed in which participants share how it feels to live the realities of concrete experiences. The intent of the study is to secure an in-depth understanding of the social, cognitive, affective, and professional realities experienced by teachers in such schools.

I believe that goal has been achieved in this study. The stories, conversations, and themes can enrich what we currently know about teaching and the use of teachers' personal practical knowledge. Furthermore, the grounded theory that emerged should provide teachers, administrators, teacher education programs, and consultants with ideas that will enable them to develop programs and resources that will more effectively meet the needs of those teaching in one-teacher inclusive schools.

References

Chase, P. & Doan, J. (1994). *Full circle: A new look at multiage education.* Plymouth, NH: Heineman.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D.J. (1986). On narrative method, personal philosophy, and narrative unities in the story of teaching. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 23, 293-310.

DeWalt, M. W. (1989, Feb.). *One-room schools in the United States.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association, Savannah, GA.

Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher thinking: A study of practical knowledge.* London: Croom Helm.

Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (1994). Inclusive schools movement and the radicalization of special education reform. *Exceptional Children*, 60, 294-309.

Guilford, A. (1991). *American's country schools.* Washington, DC: The Preservation Press.

Hargreaves, A. (1993). Individualization and individuality: Reinterpreting the teacher culture. In J. W. Little and M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Teachers' work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts* (pp 51-76). New York: Teachers College Press.

Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

West, J. F., & Idol, L. (1990). Collaborative consultation in the education of mildly handicapped and at risk students. *Remedial and Special Education*, 11(1), 22-31.